

# May said nothing new that was positive regarding the Irish dimension of Brexit



*The Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has responded to Theresa May's Florence speech by saying it was a '[genuine attempt to move things along](#)' and commending her request for a transition period as 'a step in the right direction'. These were generous words, argues **David Phinnemore** (Queen's University Belfast).*

On the Irish dimension to Brexit – the focus of a dedicated 'dialogue' alongside the formal negotiations on a financial settlement and citizens' rights and a matter on which 'sufficient progress' must be made before talks on a future trade agreement can begin – May was able to dedicate just four lines. Four lines that at best did no more than note the commitment to protecting the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement and the Common Travel Area and not accepting any physical infrastructure at the border.

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May said nothing new that was positive. It was as if through ignoring the Irish dimension, it might simply go away. The absence of engagement suggested once again an appalling failure to appreciate the challenges that Brexit poses for Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland as a whole and respond accordingly.

Michel Barnier's has made it clear that he was [unimpressed](#): 'Today's speech does not clarify how the UK intends to honour its special responsibility for the consequences of its withdrawal for Ireland'.

What did catch the eye was May's statement on the border. Rather than the language of 'seamless' and 'frictionless' – problematic as it is – she simply stated that the UK government 'will not accept any physical infrastructure at the border'. How then will the border be managed as the UK leaves the customs union and the Single Market? The absence of any detail or hint of a solution does nothing to assuage concerns that the UK government has no idea how to resolve the border issue.

Equally worrying was the assertion that the 'no physical infrastructure at the border' position is essentially the line of the Irish government and the EU 'as a whole'. It clearly is not. They are both looking to 'flexible and imaginative solutions', language that May strikingly omitted to deploy. For the [Irish government](#), the UK should remain in a customs union with the EU and in the Single Market. If that is not possible, then it has already shown a willingness to consider ideas of [Special Economic Zone](#) with Northern Ireland having its own distinctive access to the single market and the EU's customs union.



Leo Varadkar and

Theresa May, ([gov.uk](http://gov.uk)), [Open Government Licence v3.0](#).

Perhaps we should not have anticipated any significant comment on the question of the Irish border and list of issues to be addressed as part of the Ireland/Northern Ireland dialogue in the Brexit negotiations. They were not flagged as ones that May would or should address in her Florence speech. She's unlikely to address them in her speech to the Conservative Party conference in Manchester next month.

### **we should not have anticipated any significant discussion of the Irish dimension**

When Varadkar meets his UK counterpart today he will no doubt be wondering when May will begin to address the Irish dimension to Brexit with the imagination and flexibility that is called for. He's already [stated](#) that he does not think that May has said enough to allow the EU-27 to move to the second phase of the withdrawal negotiations. The near silence of May's Florence speech on Ireland and Northern Ireland means that he will not be alone.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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